



Weekly Briefing

North Macedonia social briefing:
Covid-19: Disruptions and improvised solutions in a fractured
educational system
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Covid-19: Disruptions and improvised solutions in a fractured educational system

Measures aimed at containing the coronavirus pandemic, such as the temporary closure of educational institutions, have resulted in disruptions to educational systems and processes across the world. On the 10th of March 2020, the Macedonian Government announced the precautionary decision to temporarily close all educational institutions (kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, as well as universities and all other extra-curricular institutes of education). According to UNICEF monitoring, as of June 25th, country-wide closure has been implemented in the country, affecting a total of 359.623 learners across the various educational stages (177,627 females and 181,996 males).¹ During the summer period the institutions responsible for devising and implementing educational policy (most notably the Ministry of Education and Science), will determine the approach that will be taken for the new academic year, the official start of which is the 1st of September. However, such efforts will be circumscribed by the continuing spread of the pandemic as well as the pre-existing structural and technical incapacity of the relevant institutions to fend off the continuous deterioration of the macedonian educational system. The combination of these processes makes the country vastly unprepared to adequately respond to the challenging new reality imposed by Covid 19.

Pre-corona educational challenges

Even before the arrival of Covid 19, the country's educational system was marred by many structural weaknesses, as observed and evidenced by multiple OECD country reports. The 2019 OECD Report on "The education system in the Republic of North Macedonia" found that: "Learning levels in the country are among the lowest in Europe and the Western Balkans. This reflects systemic challenges of low funding, unstable governance and limited capacity. Despite some improvements, young citizens of North Macedonia continue to leave education with among the lowest learning outcomes in Europe and the Western Balkans. Major differences in educational outcomes across different ethnic groups also persist. While poverty rates have fallen in recent decades, low educational performance is limiting the employment and life opportunities of many individuals and impeding national development."² Furthermore,

¹ <https://data.unicef.org/resources/data-to-inform-the-covid-19-response/>

² <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9b99696c-en.pdf?expires=1595859276&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=3D7732F6C23C472DAFF3878A7D993E7E>

the report correctly identifies the Ministry of Education and Sciences (MoES), as the institution responsible for developing strategic and legal documents and defining and implementing policies for all levels of education. Moreover, it concludes that the Ministry of Education and Science lacks technical capacity for evidence-based policy making or monitoring policy implementation. “This undermines the development of coherent and consistent policies and strategic planning, as observed in the repeated changes in the curriculum.”³ Furthermore, the OECD locates one of the major reasons for the system’s inefficiencies to lie in the way in which educators and education authorities are appointed: “The appointment of principals, teachers and directors of key agencies frequently reflects political affiliations rather than demonstrated competence and experience”⁴ Finally, the OECD observes that strategic documents do not set out any specific goals for the sector of education, most notably there is an absence of targets to raise learning outcomes, despite the country’s low performance in international student assessments.

Unsurprisingly for this institutional and socio-economic context, macedonian students have continuously ranked amongst the worst in the PISA Survey of 15-year-old students that assesses the extent to which students have acquired the key knowledge and skills essential for full participation in society.⁵ The assessment focuses on proficiency in reading, mathematics, science and students’ well-being. The 2018 PISA data showed that Macedonia ranked 67 out of 77 participating countries in reading and mathematics and slightly higher - 63 out of 77 countries - in science.

Improvised responses to the coronavirus challenge

The abrupt arrival of the pandemic in a context of a collapsing educational system caught the educational authorities unprepared, resulting in improvised half-baked measures aimed at tackling the day to day challenges to education which the pandemic posed. As a result, numerous guidelines and instructions have been published by the educational authorities in the past months. However, instead of facilitating the new learning process, they have contributed

³<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9b99696c-en.pdf?expires=1595859276&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=3D7732F6C23C472DAFF3878A7D993E7E>

⁴<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9b99696c-en.pdf?expires=1595859276&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=3D7732F6C23C472DAFF3878A7D993E7E>

⁵ The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a triennial survey of 15-year-old students that assesses the extent to which students have acquired the key knowledge and skills essential for full participation in society

towards the creation of a confusing and a chaotic environment, which both educators and students have had difficulties navigating.

The country's UNICEF office has attempted to support the educational authorities by offering various platforms and methods aimed at "rapidly expanding the remote learning programmes for giving children a 'learning lifeline' and a sense of normalcy." Specifically, UNICEF in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science offered two workable solutions aimed at primary school pupils: the TV-Classroom and the E-Classroom. The TV-Classroom is a collaboration between the Ministry, the Bureau for the Development of Education, UNICEF, children's television producers OXO and national broadcaster Macedonian Radio and Television, and provides programmes for younger children. The E-Classroom builds on the UNICEF-supported Eduino online learning platform aimed at supporting early learning and is described as a one-stop-shop for educational content to cover lower primary, primary, lower-secondary education for all children aged 6 to 14.⁶ As a result of the cooperation between the UNICEF and the Government, just weeks after the closures, the UNICEF-supported initiatives have reported that they have been able to offer a "mix of national broadcasting and e-learning to keep children at home and keep them learning, and by using health messages including on handwashing – to help them protect their health and the health of others."⁷

However, in spite of the availability of the platforms for the primary school level, teachers and pupils have reported numerous obstacles to their utilization and usefulness in the educational process. One major problem has been the lack of adequate resources for the conduct of online teaching and studying. A survey conducted by the Ministry of Education showed that at least 30,000 pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds do not have the conditions necessary to be able to follow online classes. Another structural problem has been that many teachers do not possess the skills and knowledge necessary to conduct distance learning. This structural disadvantage translates into an additional socio-economic disadvantage for the participation of children from poorer families in the educational process. Furthermore, even in cases where families do have the necessary resources, there are additional obstacles of access to distance learning. Namely, younger pupils more often than not need parental assistance in order to follow online teaching. However, only those parents (1 parent per family) who are

⁶ <http://www.eduino.gov.mk/>

⁷ <https://www.unicef.org/eca/stories/keeping-education-track-north-macedonia-during-covid-19-pandemic>

working in the public sector have been exempt from work during the pandemic. Other parents (such as those who work in the private sector) have had to continue working, and have not been able to support their children through the distant learning process.

The situation on the secondary school level has been similarly challenging, albeit due to a different range of reasons. Unlike the availability of platforms for online learning for the primary school level, there have been no similar platforms for distance learning made available to high school teachers and to the students. The Ministry of Education has only been able to communicate instructions for evaluations of student performance.⁸ In spite of promises to the contrary, no online educational platforms have yet been made available. Instead, teachers have been left to their creativity to choose specific social networks to conduct online classes and evaluations. Summarizing the overall situation, the Youth Educational Forum, has stated:

„The transition from the offline to the online space has complicated the educational process for all its participants (students, professors and responsible institutions). What is more, it brings to the surface pre-existing problems of the educational system in the country, such as the inadequate and insufficient digitalisation and technological unreadiness of the teaching staff. In the last months, the schools and teachers were left on their own to implement the curriculum, searching for various ways, which were not always functional and effective. Precisely because of the absence of a unified approach and clear instructions by the responsible institutions, the students have been exposed to low quality teaching, bad teacher- student communication, but also with unfair and unobjective evaluation.⁹

The Ministry of Education has announced its intention to announce the strategy for the upcoming academic year by mid august. The strategy should detail whether and which classes and levels will be taught, online, in person or through a combination of online and offline methods. Moreover, the Ministry has also promised to deliver a national platform for distant learning, which will unify the various resources and the evaluation processes in a one-stop-learning platform. In any case, even if the platform is delivered on time before the start of the

⁸<https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/nastavniczite-dobija-upatstvo-za-testirane-i-oczenuvane/?fbclid=IwAR0DFIjONdw5PcMMZMv8VchgZ9RjiKOMuLjELUIq78rsWY0TXI2DM4ppwr4>

⁹ <https://www.dw.com/mk/%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D1%88%D1%82%D0%BE-%D1%9C%D0%B5-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D1%95%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%98%D0%BD-%D0%BE%D1%84%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%98%D0%BD-%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B1%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B0/a-54273068>

academic year, this would still be far from the comprehensive solution necessary to address the broader challenge. Online education is a huge paradigmatic jump in the field of education, which requires adequate technological preparedness, stream-lined, accessible as well as tailor made resources. What is more, the appropriate utilization of such platforms depends on comprehensive training and support for both students and teachers, which have not been provided in the macedonian context. In the absence of such a multi-layered transitional process, it is to be expected that the educational process will continue to face disruptions and challenges in the coming academic year, adding an extra social burden to the overall challenge posed by the coronavirus pandemic.